

Paweł B. Sztabiński  
Polish Academy of Sciences/University of Warsaw  
Anna Dyjas-Pokorska  
Polish Academy of Sciences/ MillwardBrown SMG/KRC  
Teresa Żmijewska-Jędrzejczyk  
Polish Academy of Sciences/ MillwardBrown SMG/KRC

## UNDERSTANDING REFUSALS

The paper presents findings from a qualitative study (depth interviews in the one-to-one and dyad format), held with European Social Survey round 3 refusers in Poland. Its objective was to gather insights into reasons behind negative attitudes towards participation in surveys. Our research has shown that there is a need to distinguish between 'active' refusals and cases where surveys are ignored. In cases of 'active', conscious refusals there are some underlying reasons for refusal that could be challenged. On the other hand, social isolators 'by choice' make automatic refusals, without much thinking and, therefore, conversions are hardly possible in such cases.

Key words: advance letter, refusal, social isolation, European Social Survey

The intensive research on the phenomenon of nonresponse, carried out for over ten years now, has produced findings on a variety of related issues. Despite sometimes diverging results, this research provides a foundation for practical conclusions concerning the impact of many factors, such as advance letters, incentives, survey sponsor, topic interest etc., on survey participation. It has also brought insights into characteristics of non-respondents. However, there are not that many studies that would help us to understand how individual refusal vs. participation decisions are made and how those decisions are embedded in a broader context of individuals' characteristics, views and personal experience. A lot of information can be gathered from refusers' claims about their reasons, from follow-up surveys which ask, among others, about attitudes towards surveys, from interviews with interviewers and, last but not least, from interviews

with converted refusers or hard refusers discussing the reasons for refusals. However, each of those methods has its limitations, which means that their usefulness for the reconstruction and understanding of refusals is also limited. This is also the case with interviews with refusers, which are usually short and do not allow to elicit much substantive information on the subject (Smith 1983).

On the other hand, qualitative studies enable us to 'get into refusers' minds'. In this paper we present some findings from a study of this kind. It was designed to provide a broader context for findings from other research on reasons of refusals. The main goal was to obtain deeper insights into reasons behind negative attitudes towards survey participation.

In our study we identified behaviours which cannot really be labelled as 'a refusal to participate'. Rather, those were non-reflective behaviours: the sampled persons ignored the survey as completely non-engaging, not relevant to their life or problems. Such persons did not wonder whether or not they should agree to participate. Instead, they acted automatically, probably viewing the interview in much the same way as, for instance, unsolicited leaflets distributed in the street or by mail: without taking them into their hand or throwing them away without reading.

This paper attempts to demonstrate that reasons behind conscious refusals and non-reflective non-participation are evidently connected with two different understandings of social isolation. In the first case (refusal), non-participation is often connected with social isolation in the 'traditional' sense: a consequence of marginalisation caused by external factors, often unwanted and ensuing without the person's active involvement (advanced age, long-term unemployment, illness etc). In the second case (surveys being ignored) one usually deals with social isolation which is a more or less conscious choice: those refusers had not been pushed to the margin of the society but, rather, they themselves elected not to participate in social life and not to be immersed in it (for reasons such as their personal values and priorities). As a result, an encounter with a factor that disturbs the most important thing, the person's inner life, provides motivation to interrupt the interaction with the interviewer, who does not belong to that world and, as such, brings in unexpected disturbance.

Given that our qualitative interviews with refusers covered a great variety of detail and transcripts of 7 interviews have nearly 200 pages, this paper will focus on findings in three areas: reactions to advance letters, reasons for refusal and interpretation of social isolation of refusers.

## Data

The qualitative study with refusers (QS) was conducted in connection the European Social Survey Round 3 (ESS3) in Poland. It constituted the third stage of research, following the main ESS study and the follow-up survey with non-respondents. For this reason we will first present some essential facts and figures concerning the first two steps preceding the qualitative study.

Round 3 of ESS was conducted in Poland from 2 October to 13 December 2006 on a random sample of persons aged 15+. The rigorous research design aimed to maximise the response rate. Prior to the survey, two advance letters were mailed to all sampled persons. An unconditional gift with the ESS logo was prepared for each of the sampled persons.

Interviewers were prepared to work for the survey and were highly motivated. Each of them participated in a personal briefing devoted to introductory conversation and refusal conversion. Remuneration offered to interviewers was higher than in standard surveys and was structured progressively, i.e. dependent on individually achieved response rate.

The response rate in ESS3 reached 70.4%, the refusal rate was 15.8% whereas nonresponse for other reasons (unavailability, non-contact, illness etc.) amounted to 13.8%. Conversion was successful in 53 out of 110 soft refusals.

Approximately one month after completion of ESS fieldwork a questionnaire was mailed to all respondents, non-respondents and converted refusers. The questionnaire repeated a few questions from the ESS survey and, in the case of non-respondents, contained a question about the reasons for nonresponse. Each mailing came with an attached gift and an invitation to participate in a qualitative study. It asked 'to take part in a conversation about participation and non-participation in surveys' which would take ca. 2 hours.

Persons who expressed willingness to take part in the QS were asked to complete an application form, providing their full name, e-mail address, mailing address and telephone number. We ensured that those data would not be associated with responses given to the mail questionnaire. The proposed incentive for participation in the study was ca. EUR 25, which constituted approx. 7% of the average monthly pay in Poland at that time. The would-be interviewees were given a choice: the interview could be held in their own home or in one of a few research facilities in Poland. In the latter case reimbursement of travel costs was also offered.

In total, completed mail questionnaires were returned by 192 non-respondents (24.2% of all those mailed) and 24 converted refusers (45.3% of those

mailed). However, it is important to note that 50 non-respondents refused to accept the mailing with the questionnaire.

The QS consent form was completed by 26 persons from various regions of Poland, 3 out of them were converted refusers. We contacted those persons a few times in order to agree the time and place of the interview, to maintain their motivation and to clarify doubts. During that communication 8 persons withdrew their consent and one person turned out to be mentally ill. Two other persons did not turn up for the agreed appointment. In total, 15 persons took part in the qualitative study: 7 refusers, 2 converted refusers and 6 non-contacted persons. Due to geographic dispersion and difficulties in agreeing a convenient appointment we ultimately held 1 dyad and 13 IDIs instead of the previously intended mini-groups. The interviews were conducted from 10 to 20 April 2007. The analysis presented here concerns refusers only. Their key characteristics are provided in the table below.

Table 1. Characteristics of ESS3 refusers who participated in the qualitative study (ESS hard refusers who returned the mail questionnaire in the follow-up survey)

RESPONDENT NO.	REASONS FOR REFUSAL IN THE MAIN STUDY - DESCRIPTION FROM THE MAIL QUESTIONNAIRE	SEX	AGE*	EDUCATION	WORK STATUS	PLACE OF LIVING - SIZE	PLACE OF THE INTERVIEW	ROKEACH ICONS - THREE MOST IMPORTANT VALUES	ROKEACH ICONS - THE LEAST IMPORTANT VALUE
1	I refused to participate because I am very busy. I was redecorating my flat and I felt awkward asking her in so I had to refuse.	Female	36	basic vocational education	Housewife, look after the three children	City > 500 ths.	Qualitative research lab	6. Devoting oneself to one's own family and its problems ( <i>love as well but I think love is contained in the family</i> ) 16 Living in accordance with moral and ethical values 5 Independence, freedom of choice, individualism	3. Dominating over others, gaining power 2. Being different than everyone else, originality, extravagance 1. Busy social life, seizing the day, living for pleasures
8	I refused to participate because the interviewer came at a wrong time (I refused for selfish/egoistic reason only)	Female	28	university education	Full employed, (lecturer, probation officer at court)	City > 300 ths.	Qualitative research lab	17. Living in accordance with one's inner vocation, self-fulfilment. 7. True love, a loving partner 13. Adventurous and exciting life, constant change	1. Busy social life, seizing the day, living for pleasures 4. Luxury, opportunity to satisfy all material needs 2. Being different than everyone else, originality, extravagance
9	I refused to participate because I am afraid of letting strangers in	Man	16	primary education	Student - lower secondary school	village > 1000 inhab.	Qualitative research lab	7. True love, a loving partner 14. Living in harmony with nature, far away from city noise 15 Living in accordance with teachings of the Church and religious dictates.	3. Dominating over others, gaining power 8. Quiet life, far away from everyday problems. 4. Luxury, opportunity to satisfy all material needs.
18	I refused to participate because the interviewer came at a wrong time	Female	73	university education	Retired person, doing voluntary work (teacher, probation officer at court)	City > 300 ths.	Qualitative research lab	7. True love, a loving partner 14. Living in harmony with nature, far away from city noise 15. Living in accordance with teachings of the Church and religious dictates	3. Dominating over others, gaining power 8. Quiet life, far away from everyday problems 10. Comfortable life in a big city, making use of all its advantages
20	I refused to participate because my family members opposed to my participation in the survey	Man	67	basic vocational education	Retired person	City > 100 ths.	At respondent flat	6. Devoting oneself to one's own family and its problems 14. Living in harmony with nature, far away from city noise. 15. Living in accordance with teachings of the Church and religious dictates	1. Busy social life, seizing the day, living for pleasures 4. Luxury, opportunity to satisfy all material needs 11. Making a career and achieving success at work
23	I refused to participate because I was afraid I would not cope with providing answers to the survey questions	Man	61	primary education	Retired person	City > 400 ths.	At respondent flat	8. Quiet life, far away from everyday problems 14. Living in harmony with nature, far away from city noise 5. Independence, freedom of choice, individualism	3. Dominating over others, gaining power 10. Comfortable life in a big city, making use of all its advantages 11. Making a career and achieving success at work
26	I refused to participate because I am very busy	Man	22	secondary education	Hired worker - uniformed services	City > 400 ths.	Qualitative research lab	6. Devoting oneself to one's own family and its problems 7. True love, a loving partner 11. Making a career and achieving success at work	4. Luxury, opportunity to satisfy all material needs 14. Living in harmony with nature, far away from city noise. 1. Busy social life, seizing the day, living for pleasures

Data from the table show that QS participants were of various ages, with various educational backgrounds and work status, living in domiciles of various sizes. Our initial concerns proved unfounded as there was no obvious prevalence of people who had a lot of time and were worse-off and who, as such, would be financially motivated to take part in the QS (particularly retired persons, health pensioners and unemployed citizens).

After completion of the qualitative study we held a debriefing session with the authors of the study and interviewers who moderated the dyad and the depth interviews. The aim of the debriefing session was to discuss the results obtained in more detail.

## **Reactions to advance letters**

There is considerable research evidence that advance letters generally increase the response rate in surveys by a few (up to a dozen or so) percentage points, at least in telephone interviews (Dillman, Gallegos, and Frey 1976, Traugott, Groves and Lepkowski 1987). This stems mostly from reduction of refusals (Mann 2005). Some studies, however, found that advance letters had no effect on the final response rate (Singer, Van Hoewyk and Maher 2000). Moreover, an opposite effect is also possible, albeit not empirically confirmed: if a sampled person is warned about a survey, he/she may be better prepared to refuse once the interviewer calls (Groves and Couper 1998, Stoop 2005).

In surveys held in recent years, increases in response rates driven by advance letters have been relatively low i.e. a few percentage points. This may indicate that effectiveness of this tool declines over time (Hembroff et al. 2005, Link and Mokdad 2005, Mann 2005). Effectiveness of an advance letter may also vary across subgroups (Link and Mokdad 2005).

It is obvious that an advance letter which is to fulfil its role must be first received and then read by the sampled person. Yet a study conducted by Link and Mogdad (2005) shows that 26.6% of the respondents claimed they never received the letter and 12.6% gave a 'don't know' answer. It is possible that they personally did not receive the letter. Couper, Mathiowetz and Singer (1995) demonstrated in their research that in approximately a half of all households one member sorts the mail before reading and that more than 60% throw away some mails without reading them. However, this does not apply to individually addressed letters.

Another possibility is that sampled persons simply do not read the advance letter or do not remember it. They might only, as noted by Groves and Couper (1998), inspect it briefly in order to check whether this is a bill or an offer of some benefit for the household. If not, they will throw it away.

A chance for the advance letter to be read increases if it is short. On the other hand, a longer letter may signal an important message (Dillman, Gallegos, and Frey 1976, Dillman 2000, Groves and Couper 1998). Another factor that may prompt the recipient to read the letter is the authority of the sponsor and of the person signing the letter (Brunner and Carroll 1969, Groves and Couper 1998).

As mentioned earlier, two advance letters were sent in Round 3 of ESS in Poland. The first one (see next page) was mailed one week before the start of the survey. It provided distributions of answers to some questions from the previous ESS round in an attempt to make sampled persons interested in the subject and to illustrate that the survey was not difficult. The second letter repeated some survey information and contained the interviewer's name and an approximate date of interviewer's visit. It was mailed approx. one week before the planned interviewer's visit. The aim was to reduce the insecurity associated with a stranger's visit and to maintain the motivation to participate, which may have dwindled during the long fieldwork period. The letter came with an attached consent/refusal form and a postage stamp. Sampled persons who did not want to participate were asked to complete and return the refusal form by mail.

Each letter was two pages long. The first page contained essential information and the second page provided more details, addressing some frequently asked questions concerning surveys.



**Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk**  
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences



Warsaw, 25 September 2006

Dear Sir,

You have been randomly drawn to participate in an international survey known as the *European Social Survey*. The survey aims to collect opinions from members of the public about a variety of topics that are important for Poland and Europe. This survey is being conducted for the third time now. The first edition was completed in 2002 and the second one in 2004. This edition will cover 30 countries across Europe, both members and non-member states of the European Union, incl. Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. The European Social Survey is designed to understand where people from different countries have similar views and opinions and where they differ in views. The survey in Poland is co-ordinated by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences.

The vast majority of people find participation in a survey of this kind to be an interesting and pleasant experience. The questionnaire will cover a variety of topics and no specialist knowledge or specific information is required to answer its questions. In order to give you a better idea of the issues covered in the questionnaire we have attached a summary of answers to a few questions asked in the European Social Survey in 2002 and 2004. These data were obtained in Poland and, for comparison, we have included data from other countries. We hope you will find the attached results interesting.

More details about the survey are given overleaf. We will notify you about the approximate dates of the survey in our next letter. Should you wish to obtain any additional information or clarification now, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call, i.e. dial the toll-free number 9222 and ask to get connected with the phone number given below), preferably from Monday to Wednesday. The telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences is (22) 826 96 17. You can also contact us via e-mail at [orbs@ifispan.waw.pl](mailto:orbs@ifispan.waw.pl). We will be happy to answer your questions.

Information about the European Social Survey is also available on the following Internet sites: <http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/badania/ess/> (in Polish), and <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> (in English).

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

Director  
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology  
Polish Academy of Sciences

Professor Henryk Domański

National Project Co-ordinator  
European Social Survey  
Head of ORBS IFIS PAN

Associate Professor Paweł B. Sztabiński

**IMPORTANT:** If you are under 18 years of age, please show this letter to your parents.



### Information about the European Social Survey

1. The European Social Survey is one of major social sciences in Europe. In 2005 it received the Descartes Award from the European Commission. This is the most prestigious European awards in science and research.
2. The survey is co-ordinated by an international research committee where Poland is represented by prof. dr hab. Henryk Domański, the Director of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences.
3. The results of the survey arouse considerable interest in Poland and worldwide. To date, nearly 10,000 people from 97 countries have used the survey data. Poland has hosted two conferences devoted to the ESS findings and two books have been published based on its results (*Niepokoje polskie* in 2004 and *W środku Europy?* in 2006).
4. **Anyone interested can view complete results of the survey.** They are available free of charge on the following website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>
5. This survey covers nearly three thousand people throughout Poland. Their addresses were randomly drawn from the data kept by the Information Technology Development and Public Register System Department in Warsaw. Please note that random drawing of addresses for surveys such as this one is in compliance with the Personal Data Protection Act of 29 August 1997, as published in the Official Journal no. 133 item 883, with subsequent amendments.
6. **It is crucial for accuracy of survey findings that all of the sampled persons agree to participate.** If some of them refuse to take part, their views, obviously, will not be reflected. As a result, the survey findings will not reflect the views of the society as a whole.
7. The execution of the survey is in compliance with all requirements stipulated by the Personal Data Protection Act. This means that answers given in the survey are treated as confidential. They will not be disclosed to anyone or published anywhere with names or any other details that would enable identification of our respondents. Responses given by survey participants will be processed only into aggregate statistical files. After the survey is completed, addresses of persons who were sampled for the survey will be deleted to prevent them from being used for other purposes.
8. Participation in the Survey is voluntary.

Thank you very much for your interest. We hope for your participation.

*What did refusers remember from the advance letter?*

The majority of persons who participated in our QS (refusers) hardly recalled the fact of receiving advance letters. They did not remember whether or not they received the letters at all and how many letters they received. They confused advance letters with the mail questionnaire sent within the follow-up survey. This may have been due to the time lapse (a few months) between the receipt of advance letters and the QS. However, considering the aforementioned findings by Link and Mogdad (2005), this may indicate that some sampled persons just ignored the letters.

Some QS participants mentioned a practice of sorting mails. If a mailing is not enveloped, it is discarded immediately, without even being skimmed. This confirms the findings by Couper, Mathiowetz and Singer (1995) and by Hembroff et al. (2005). In the Polish ESS3 the advance letter did draw attention. *'If it had been just a card, without an envelope, it wouldn't have been read at all'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'that envelope looked, kind of, more distinct'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it seems that the letter did reach the recipients and was not thrown away with advertising mail.

The QS participants have little to say about advance letters. As indicated earlier, the letters were printed on letterhead paper, with the name of the sponsor on the envelope, yet hardly any of the QS participants noticed the sponsor or identified it correctly (for instance: *'A development institute, I think, something to do with the European Union'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'A professor needed it for some scientific study or something'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). Some participants were not sure whether the sponsor's name was provided at all (*'it didn't say who was doing that /survey/, or did it? /.../ I didn't even wonder who was sending that to me'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, univ. degree, academic – during her university education this person attended lectures by professors from the Polish Academy of Sciences which she recalls as very interesting). Others mentioned *'some institute'* (9: M, 16 y.o., student) or claimed it did not matter who was conducting the survey (1: F, 36 y.o., married, basic vocat. educ., 3 children, housewife).

The ESS sponsor, Polish Academy of Sciences, enjoys very high prestige and trust in Poland. This fact was confirmed by all QS participants when they were asked about it directly. However, this prestigious sponsor was not noticed by the vast majority of the QS participants. Only one participant remarked that

---

<sup>1</sup> y.o – years old.

a renowned research institution was the sponsor (yet he remembered the name incorrectly), which made him interested in the letter: *'Because this was the institute, I was curious what that could be'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

As far as the survey sponsor is concerned, it is important to emphasise that each participant received a total of 4 mailings on letterhead paper, with the sponsor's name printed on the envelope: two advance letters and 2 letters connected with the follow-up survey. The last mailing (thank you/remind letter) was sent approx. one month before the QS. Moreover, we contacted each participant repeatedly in connection with the QS, each time quoting the full name of the sponsoring institution. This means there were many occasions to notice the sponsor.

Likewise, the participants recalled very little from the content of the letter. While the majority remembered the title of the survey (more or less accurately) from the logo inserted in the letters, they openly admitted they could not remember what the survey was all about (for instance: */it was/ 'a request to complete a questionnaire, but I'm taking a blind guess now'* 8: F, 28 y.o., married, univ. degree, academic). Some remembered a vague relationship to the European Union (for instance: *'a European survey... /.../ the idea was that the European Union is interested in it'* 1: F, 36 y.o., married, basic vocat. educ., 3 children, housewife), thought it was an international survey devoted to social issues (*/it was about a survey on / 'human relations, not just in our country but also in Europe, in the world'* 18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired) or reported connotations which were unrelated to the content of the letter (for instance: *'there was a letter written about... asking if people wanted to co-operate. A consent, something like that'* 20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired). One person also remembered what annoyed her about the letter, i.e. the information about random drawing: *'The first thing was about some random drawing... stupid. That's what I thought'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired).

It is difficult to say whether or not the QS participants actually had read any of the advance letters, whether the first or the second one. Some claimed they had read the letter(s), others said they had only browsed through it (them) to get an idea what it was all about and yet others just read the beginning. Some accounts were inconsistent: the same participants first claimed they had read the advance letter but further on they admitted only browsing through it or vice versa. It is worth noting that very little, or nothing, drew their attention in the letter apart from the ESS logo.

Again, one might wonder how well advance letter recipients will remember the content of the letters after a few months. However, it seems that if the advance letter had contained any important information, the recipients should have remembered it. After all, requests to participate in a survey are not received

very often, at least not in Poland. Secondly, essential information about the ESS was repeated in the letter attached to the follow-up survey and in the thank you/remind letter afterwards, so this information reached the participants four times. Thirdly, the coloured (red) ESS logo was placed on the gifts which each sampled person received, which should have aided recipient's memory.

### *Reactions to advance letters*

Three main types of reactions to advance letters can be identified. The first group of QS participants ignored the letter completely. They decided the matter was unimportant and not worth their while so they immediately forgot about it. Here are a few illustrative statements:

*'I read it and decided it didn't matter; it wasn't important. Perhaps someone made a mistake and that wasn't important /.../ I just didn't think much about it, I threw it away, it didn't make sense to me, I didn't take it seriously. /.../ I put it in the kitchen drawer. I wanted to show it to my husband but I forgot about it /.../ I just ignored it, as simple as that. I didn't even read it carefully, I just threw it away' (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic vocat. educ., housewife); 'People are playing some games, don't know why... That's what I thought' (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired); 'I opened it, read it and thought: oh! just a questionnaire... /.../ I left it lying around /.../ When I got that questionnaire from you, I didn't pay any attention to it the first time around. I did pay some attention to the second or the third letter though. Well, I admit it: it was kind of like getting it off my back' (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).*

The second type of reaction involved apprehension and distrust. Such reaction was reported by elderly, poorly educated persons who had a sense of being marginalised. Elements of this reaction can be also observed in statements made by one young working participant. Apprehension and distrust were generated by the fact that an institution from Warsaw, one they did not know, had their full name and address and approached them about a thing that they did not find very clear. This experience reminded them of fraud and attempts to obtain money under false pretences, of door-to-door peddlers and direct marketing campaigns. They mentioned numerous examples of similar cases which they had heard of or even fell victim to (or their friends/relatives did). One person said: *'Generally, it wasn't very annoying but I wondered why, where my name came from.'* Still, it did seem to be a problem for that person because it was reiterated during the interview (e.g. *'But where did it come from, my name, I mean?'*

*From some kind of a register.*’) Then the participant told the interviewer about numerous attempts various people made to contact him or his neighbours, by letter or telephone, in order to offer something for sale, to borrow money etc. In some of those cases either letters were addressed personally to him or the caller knew his name: *‘Last week I answered three phone calls myself. One was advertising some duvets. And they mentioned my last name, that’s interesting.’* Such stories were repeated throughout the interview and the interviewee tried to make a point that one must be very careful in encounters with other people. *‘A stranger will call, you know, they trick people into paying money, so it’s not too... When I hear a voice that sounds wrong, I hang up and don’t talk. /.../ They keep calling me, canvassing. They call people, send ads all the time.’* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

Another retiree speaks in a similar tone, yet his sense of insecurity is less strong and his reaction is that of annoyance: *‘Those surveys /i.e. advance letter/ are damaged by those mail order companies. They’d write ‘You won this or that....’ That’s what they are like. You need to make a payment or to call them and they’re just about to send you the keys to your car. People get angry at this, they just dump those letters in the bin and that’s it. /.../ How many times... /did they call me/... This and that, you’ve just won something. So I tell them, go ahead, keep it to yourself if I really won something. That kind of rubbish is done to trick you into calling them and paying the money. You have to pay for the phone call.’* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired)

As mentioned earlier, some sense of insecurity in connection with advance letters was mentioned also by a young man (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). While he ignored the letter completely (see above), his first reaction was that of alarm. He said this was because of his general distrustful attitude: *‘I always assume that if someone approaches me, it’s because they want to earn money on that.’* He then carried on by telling a story about a door-to-door salesman who persuaded his grandmother to buy something she did not need at all. As a result, that interviewee did read the advance letter at some point (most probably the second one, judging by his earlier statement): *‘I just wanted to check and read what this was all about, to find out what it was and to check if this wasn’t an attempt to trick me into paying money or something.’* What inspired his trust was the sponsor and, importantly, absence of any gifts or any promise to hand in a gift: *‘/the letter/ reassured me that it wasn’t /a fraud attempt/. There was no talk about any gifts or anything of that sort.’*

The third type of reaction can be described as directly expressed reluctance. However, based on the participant’s statement it is difficult to establish the rea-

son for reluctance. She claims the letter failed to provide essential information (*'It was about that purpose, I didn't know what purpose it would serve and who was behind it'* 8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic), yet the information *was* provided. This means that if she really wanted to get the information, she could have found it, and if it was not to her complete satisfaction, she could have written an e-mail or called the toll-free number.

Another thing worth mentioning in connection with advance letters is the attached return postcard. It gave the sampled persons the opportunity to express a refusal before the interviewer's visit. In fact, the QS participants either could not recall it at all, or could not remember returning it, or ignored it completely deciding it was not worth their attention.

### *Summary and conclusions concerning advance letters*

Participants of our qualitative study (refusers) did not throw the advance letter away with other advertising mailings. The fact that the letter came in an envelope played an important role. They did not read the letter but just checked whether it concerned anything that would be personally important/relevant to them. Nothing drew their attention apart from the ESS logo. They did not check what the letter was about and what they were asked to do. They were not interested in who had sent the letter to them. As they did not find anything relevant in the letter, they dealt with it as with other unsolicited mailings: threw it away or put it aside and forgot about it.

The only aspect that attracted attention of some participants, elderly and socially marginalised, was their personal data on the envelope: this was the only element of the letter that personally concerned them. However, this made them apprehensive: an unfamiliar institution approaches them about something that is quite unclear and, worse still, that institution has access to their personal data. These concerns were raised by the fact that advance letters arrive in the context of annoying mass mailings, door-to-door selling, telemarketing and various fraud attempts. As a result, those letters are associated with such activities. However, such connotations did not encourage participants to read the letter more carefully. Thus, they threw the letter away which was a defence reaction. As we will show further, such persons do not admit having received the advance letter when talking to the interviewer (*'I didn't get anything, I don't know anything'*).

Another aspect of reluctance generated by advance letters is connected (as we will show later) with intrusion into privacy or, more broadly, into self-

centred life. Therefore, an advance letter is seen as an unfamiliar institution's attempt to impose something: an interviewer's visit in this case. The aforementioned QS participant could remember nothing about the letter but she did recall her own negative reaction to it. Most probably, she suppressed the unpleasant fact (someone approached her about a matter which does not concern her directly).

Overall, it seems that advance letters are ignored by QS participants because they do not concern any aspects of reality that would be personally relevant or an aspect they would like to focus on. However, this is not connected with lack of interest in the topic of the survey. Opinion surveys have shown that support for EU membership among the Polish public has stood at about 70–80% for some time now (the topic of the ESS was associated with the EU by letter recipients). Moreover, none but one QS participants made any critical comments about the topic. In most cases the problem does not lie even in general disregard for surveys. When recipients of advance letters realised that it did not concern a matter that was personally relevant to them, they lost interest and did not take the trouble to check its contents. Other participants who did check what the letter was about felt that the whole thing was unimportant for them. This kind of reaction was also found among open-minded people engaged in social activities. After all the final result is the same in each case: advance letters are not read, they are put aside or thrown away.

The second advance letter was viewed in very much the same way. The QS participants did not remember it at all because it contained no novel elements in comparison with the first one. Consequently, they dealt with it in the same way as they deal with marketing mailings, i.e. paid no attention to it. The second letter may have also caused irritation (*'they are bothering me again'*), which may have caused one participant's negative reaction to the second letter. In this context it is important to recall that 50 persons refused to accept the mail questionnaire in the follow-up survey.

The logic of living a life focused on one's own world might well explain the anxiety caused by advance letters. For some of our QS participants, the fact that someone had access to their personal data was the only thing which they found relevant about the letter. Likewise, suspicions about fraud, scams and marketing tricks were a thing which concerned the recipients personally.

One might consider participating in a survey when there is nothing else to do at a particular moment. One comment about participation in the follow-up survey provides a good illustration: *I dropped it /mail questionnaire/ in the mailbox out of boredom. It might or might not get there, might or might not*

reach them.’ (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). This quotation shows that the respondent completed the mail questionnaire for his personal benefit, i.e. to kill boredom, but he did not care what would happen to the questionnaire later.

On the other hand, these types of reactions to advance letters may, to some extent, be related to the size of the letter and the abundance of information in it. During the debriefing session interviewers pointed out that a long letter discourages recipients from reading it and, in combination with personal data on the envelope, produces negative reactions (*‘someone, an institution expects me to wade through such a long text’*). Moreover, the important elements, i.e. information about the source of data and the possibility to contact the sender by phone, are lost among other information.

Yet another problem is posed by the presence of the expression *‘you have been randomly drawn’*. This phrase cannot be easily replaced yet it turns out to be unfortunate. It reminds recipients of marketing contests, attempted fraud and scams and, as such, either alarms them or, at best, causes them to disregard the letter. Such reactions may become more widespread and more common as Internet penetration increases. They may be driven by the spreading of e-mail fraud (messages about false ‘great’ lottery wins or requests for help in return for substantial financial rewards).

Last but not least, advance letters are associated with a more general problem. During the debriefing session interviewers pointed out that advance letters impose the time of the interview onto the sampled persons. Even if the interview date is not expressly stated, the sheer fact of an unannounced visit is viewed as an imposition. This generates resistance against strangers’ attempts to manage recipients’ time (*‘a stranger wants to come to my home, expects me to do him/her a favour and, worse still, decides when to come.’*).

Considering all this, we should ask: is it at all possible to achieve a positive perception of advance letters and to motivate recipients to participate in a survey? Putting aside matters of practical implementability, the following procedure may achieve that effect. The first letter would be preceded by a phone call to announce the arrival of the letter, explain the purpose of the survey, emphasise that it is conducted by a respected institution and, most importantly, to explain how personal data were obtained. During that phone call the potential respondent would be asked for a favour (i.e. devoting time to answer the survey questions) but, crucially, would be given an opportunity to do so at a moment of his/her choice. The idea is to give the sampled persons a full sense of control over the situation and, perhaps more importantly, to enable the sampled persons to make their own decision about making ‘a self-sacrifice’ or doing a favour. Such



'self-sacrifice' may be a source of satisfaction and it is important to bear in mind that refusers participating in our QS put themselves and their own satisfaction first. In that sense, the awareness of that 'self-sacrifice' will be a reward in itself (Dillman 1978, 2000).

## **Reasons for refusal**

Sociologists who investigate nonresponse generally believe that the decision to participate in a face-to-face survey is made when the interviewer appears on someone's doorstep (Stoop 2005). According to Groves and Couper (1998), there may be two reasons for it. Firstly, sampled persons are usually not interested in surveys strongly enough to weigh all pros and cons. Secondly, information supplied in advance letters is usually so general that it does not enable serious decision-making.

A decision to participate in a survey may be influenced by a variety of factors. Smith (1984, quoted after Stoop 2005) distinguishes between propitiousness and inclination to participate in survey as factors which drive refusal. Propitiousness is situational factor. An interviewer may visit the sampled person at an inconvenient moment e.g. when the sampled person is doing household chores, entertaining guests or is about to leave etc. These sorts of refusals are not final: it is enough to make an appointment at a more convenient time. Regardless of propitiousness, sampled persons may have varying degree of inclination or willingness to be interviewed. Some reasons behind unwillingness may be temporary, e.g. family problems or work-related pressure. Other, however, are relatively permanent and, as such, difficult to overcome. This might include the fear of intrusion, general concerns about confidentiality and privacy etc. The inclination to be interviewed might also be connected with personality traits such as suspiciousness, misanthropy, misogyny etc.

Analysis of relatively permanent reasons for unwillingness and the resulting refusals usually distinguishes between survey-related and person-related reasons (Stoop 2005). The former may be associated with a general ideas about surveys, that is the need for surveys, their significance, confidence in survey results and data confidentiality, ideas of interviewer's visits at home and questions asked as an intrusion into privacy, as well as past experience of survey participation. However, such reasons may also be related to the sampled person's ideas about the particular survey she/he has been invited to take part in. This includes, above all, interest in the topic, survey sponsor but also the anticipated difficulty of the

interview, its duration etc. Other survey-related reasons may include fears of letting in a stranger who may turn out to be a door-to-door salesman or a thief.

Person-related reasons of refusal include, above all, the time needed to answer survey questions but also the stress and effort involved in an interview, reluctance expressed by other household members, old age, health situation etc.

Laurie, Smith, and Scott (1999) found that conversion of refusals for survey-related reasons is more difficult (i.e. conversion attempts are less likely to be successful) than is the case with person-related reasons. However, this finding may have limited applicability. The authors' analysis covered the third and fourth round of a panel survey, which means that the survey-related reasons mentioned by the respondents related to that particular survey rather than their general ideas about surveys. Moreover, the most common survey-related reason was 'can't be bothered,' which may have been caused by respondents' fatigue from participation in earlier rounds of the survey.

There is little literature reporting systematic research on the effects of various factors on decisions to participate in surveys. One survey-related factor which has been found to play an important role is topic interest. Couper (1997) shows that persons who, during an introductory conversation, demonstrated lack of interest in the topic or no knowledge of it, were more likely to refuse than other sampled persons. Similar conclusions can be drawn from other studies. Groves, Presser and Dipko (2004) held an experiment covering five surveys on different topics. Each survey was conducted on samples from different populations but they were specifically selected to ensure that the survey topic would be potentially interested for one of the samples. The findings generally confirmed that sampled persons were more willing to take part in surveys on topics which they found personally interesting. The odds of cooperating were higher for topic of interest than for other topics by roughly 40%.

However, findings from other studies indicate that the connection between a topic of interest and survey participation is not quite so straightforward. Not only should the topic be of interest but the respondents should find it rewarding to think about the topic. For instance, it could bring back pleasant memories, offer psychological benefits of demonstrating knowledge in an important area, draw more public attention to an area which the respondent considers important. If a relevant topic generates negative thoughts or unpleasant memories, it will not drive survey participation (Groves et al. 2006).

The sponsor is another survey-related factor which influences the decision to participate. It is generally believed (and this is reflected in research) that people are more willing to take part in government and academic surveys than in com-

mercial ones (Groves and Couper 1998), which may result from their sense of civic duty, obligations towards government institutions and recognition of their authority. However, research by Stocke and Langfeld (2004) indicates that attitudes toward surveys may not depend on the sponsor.

Some attention should be devoted to one person-related factor influencing participation decisions i.e. lack of time. It is among the most commonly given reasons of refusal. However, a review of studies on the relation between discretionary time and refusals, made by Ineke Stoop (2005), indicated an opposite trend: people who have less time (working and generally more active people) are more likely to participate in surveys than those who have more time (pensioners, unemployed). This stems from the fact that people who work, including those who do voluntary work, are more socially involved. Abraham, Maitland and Bianci (2006) found little confirmation for the hypothesis that busy people participate in surveys less frequently. Similar conclusions can be drawn from Couper's findings (1997). While the percentage of people who claim to be 'too busy' when refusing declines as age increases (reaching its lowest in the group of elderly citizens), the frequency of such statements is unrelated to the number of hours worked (for employed persons).

One might wonder to what extent claimed reasons of refusal reflect actual reasons – of course if we assume that such actual reasons do exist and refusals are not just caused by disregard for surveys. Ineke Stoop (2005) shows that sampled persons might just want to get rid of interviewer's presence as soon as possible and to avoid talking. According to Brehm (1993), scepticism about refusers' accounts of their reasons seems justified. Refusers may just name the first reason they can think of but this reason will not necessarily be true. They may also name a reason which they think will be convincing for the interviewer and, finally, they might have no full awareness of why they are refusing. On the other hand, research conducted by Couper (1997) demonstrates that declarations of no interest made during the introductory conversation are significant: they indicate a general attitude towards that particular topic. Even if such person ultimately agrees to participate, the overall validity of the resulting data will be lower (more 'missing' data). However, this does not apply to claims about being 'too busy,' which seem to be a polite form of refusal. Therefore, the validity of stated reasons for refusal generally seems to be difficult to assess.

### *Opinions and ideas about surveys*

It is a paradox that nearly all participants of our QS, i.e. hard refusers, declare a positive attitude towards surveys and willingness to participate in them. However, there are three essential categories that can be identified among the QS participants in terms of ideas and opinions about surveys.

The first category comprises persons who have a totally indifferent attitude towards surveys and state it openly. They are not interested in results of public opinion polls and consider that participation is a waste of time. Here are some examples of participants' opinions about surveys: *'It /surveys/ makes me think about using my time for some purposes'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working); *'People work a lot and they have no time, and if someone bothers them with a questionnaire, they say, leave me alone, I have no time'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife). They might be willing to spend a few minutes (up to a quarter of an hour or so) but certainly not one hour. As for anonymity, trust in survey results and intrusion of privacy caused by an interviewer's visit or by questions asked, the participants from this group have never thought about it and have no particular ideas about these aspects. One participant started each answer to questions about this subject by saying: *'I haven't thought about it'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife)

People who belong to this category do appreciate the sense of practically-oriented surveys yet in a very narrow sense. These are surveys aiming to explore people's opinions on matters that concern them directly and that translate into decisions that affect people directly. Those could be, for instance, surveys in schools asking parents how many foreign languages their children should learn or how many sports classes should be organised. Other such surveys would ask about compensation levels and housing situation of people working in the same industry; those could also be market surveys since their results are directly translated into decisions that concern users: *'Asking people whether they like it /a product/ and what can be changed, or perhaps improved. It will be positive, too, for those people'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

Refusers who belong to this category would be willing to take part in other surveys as long as they met the aforementioned criteria i.e. if they concerned them directly and translated into decisions. In this sense, it would be a kind of a referendum. *'People would take part more often and would be more willing if those surveys not only reflected what people think but if that had some impact, some echo, if that survey wasn't just a piece of paper that is completed, studied and then thrown away in the bin.'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working);

*I think that if this brings about some changes and I think I would take part /in a survey/ then'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife).

A face to face interview is the best research technique because it requires least effort on the part of the participant: *'Something I could do effortlessly'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

The second category which should be identified with regard to ideas and opinions about surveys includes people who declare their understanding of sense and meaningfulness of surveys. They associate surveys mostly with public opinion polls, yet more educated participants also mention academic research in this context. Surveys mean: *'Checking some kind of opinions ... /.../ How people live. Whether they like the country's president'* (9: M, 16 y.o., student); *'It reminds me of things I've seen on television. /.../ It usually will concern MPs, government, the way the country is ruled and how the government works, how the parliament works'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

Participants from this group identify various goals of surveys. For instance, informing the government about opinions of the public, gaining knowledge about the society, but also offering some benefits for the society: the public should know how much support the authorities, politicians and their decisions enjoy etc. *'They should be organised /.../ to get a picture of the society, of people, what people think, what they're like'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired); *'surveys are/ mostly to satisfy curiosity of a researcher or a team of researchers and, further on, to improve the situation of a certain group of people i.e. the one that the survey concerns'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic); *'To let the public know. To show people what public support looks like, or support for individual politicians, /.../ Someone will say that the society wishes this or that to happen and the result will be positive'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'the government/ might learn what to do to make people's lives better in this country'* (9: M, 16 y.o., student).

Those QS respondents identify a variety of benefits that surveys bring for their participants: an opportunity to express one's views, to have an interesting conversation, to ponder about some problems, and to gain satisfaction from participating in a useful initiative. *'Above all, I think that those surveys serve the respondents; you get to know yourself better, you get the chance of expressing an opinion, of shaping your own views'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic); *'this is/ Quite cool. /.../ You can learn things /.../ you get a chance to say what you think'* (9: M, 16 y.o., student); *'Satisfaction/ that the thing I wanted to say was used in some positive way'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired); *'It's a good idea /for people/ to say what things look like, from the parlia-*

*ment or the government, or political parties'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

The benefits and goals of surveys mentioned by the participants seem to indicate some prior reflection on the topic but perhaps this reflection was elicited by our QS. Unlike the previous category, this group does not treat surveys as a sort of referendum, even poorly educated participants do not. Rather, surveys are viewed as a vehicle of information about public sentiments and opinions for politicians. Even more importantly, this group appreciates the benefits of surveys for the society at large and for respondents themselves. Therefore, it is not surprising that surveys are not viewed as a waste of public money.

QS participants from this group do not have any reservations about sharing their personal opinions with interviewers or giving answers to personal questions such as, e.g. income level. Nor do they feel suspicious about anonymity of survey results. Their experience of survey participation is limited but not negative. Thus, this is not the case of oversurveying, either.

However, this group raised some issues which may have ultimately prompted them not to participate in ESS. The first one was that the authorities do not make use of survey results. Consequently, people do not feel that their participation in a survey will make any difference and this discourages them from participating. However, considering various goals and benefits associated with participation, the impact of surveys on government decisions does not seem to play the key role. Some even talked about this openly, and one participant who raised this issue claimed that in a democratic system participation in surveys is the same kind of obligation as voting in elections (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired).

The second problem that was raised concerned doubts or reservations about reliability of survey results. Those reservations were of varying nature. Some of them may be high-level reservations: to what extent can surveys predict actual behaviours of members of the public? This was mentioned in the context of inaccurate election forecasts: *I believe /survey results/ more or less. But before the last parliamentary elections it turned out that was not true'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired). Other participants voiced their suspicions about survey results being manipulated by politicians, for instance surveys may be conducted in those regions of the country where support for a particular political party is high. However, in participants' opinion, such manipulations do not happen in academic/research surveys and, additionally, the latter are more in-depth.

Another type of reservations concerned the transient nature of opinions expressed in surveys. *A survey is a random thing. Someone will have a different opinion and he'll start wondering about something a moment later.*

*This is the kind of opinions you get from surveys'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired).

The third, and perhaps most important, problem raised in connection with surveys was the reluctance to let an interviewer, that is a stranger, into their homes. This reluctance had two aspects and had varying intensity. The first aspect was reluctance caused by psychological factors, connected with intrusion into privacy during an interviewer's visit. Some undefined unwillingness to let strangers in seems to be based on these very grounds: *'One is not very willing... I do it myself. /.../ Unwilling /to let them/ in one's home.'* However, the fear is not related to the risk of theft but the situation when *'that stranger might have a look, might watch, that feels kind of... /.../ It's not a visitor. It's someone who hasn't been invited. Someone who wants to know things they shouldn't know'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired). And such opinion was expressed in spite of the fact that this particular respondent is a probation officer supervising children from dysfunctional families and she also visits homes of children who are in her care and holds interviews there.

Some participants strongly perceive an interviewer's visit as intrusion into privacy and talk about it openly. Their home is their castle, a place where they live they lives in their own way and do not want to see any strangers. *'This disrupts the daily rhythm of the household, it's intrusion into privacy /.../ A home is an asylum, a place where I don't allow any strangers, any people I don't know. Yet an interviewer is a stranger, an unknown person, I don't want to see such a person in my home'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic).

Reluctance about letting strangers in may be also driven by concerns about personal safety and safety of the house, which gives rise to general suspiciousness towards strangers. Any document, including interviewer's ID card or even official identity document, may be counterfeit. As a result, no strangers are allowed in those participants' homes. *'Today a woman rang /the doorbell / saying she was from the post office. We know the postman, we've lived here for so long. And the postman knows us. And that one was a woman, and nobody opened the door because she rang all the way up to our flat. And I didn't open the door for her, either so I don't really know who she was. /.../ 'cause we really are afraid'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

Participants from this category are generally characterised by certain inconsistencies in their comments about surveys and inconsistency between claimed and actual behaviours. On the one hand, they claim they dismiss or flatly reject the possibility of letting strangers in, but on the other hand they believe that an in-home survey is a better method than a telephone survey or a mail question-

naire because it offers an opportunity for a personal encounter. *I'd say that would best be the kind /of interview/ which we're having now /.../ comfortably, it's like we're talking right now. That's a kind of discussion'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired – he does not let strangers into his flat); *'/a face-to-face conversation/ gives you a better rapport'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired – a person who treats his home as his private space); *'At first there was some initial information, by letter or by phone, saying that this kind of survey will be held, asking for consent. And interviewer's visit would be step two'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic – she treats her home as an asylum where she does not allow strangers).

And, finally, what is probably most surprising, the aforementioned statements by participants from this category where they recognise the need to hold surveys and mention numerous benefits of surveys remain in contradiction with their firm refusal to participate in the ESS.

This discrepancy between statements and behaviours may be caused by a few factors, not contradicting one another. Firstly, a certain kind of social desirability (Edwards 1957) may play a role here. During a conversation with a person representing a prestigious research institution which holds surveys the participants would not feel comfortable admitting that they disregard surveys and research methods applied by the institution (face-to-face encounters) as wrong. If this factor does play a role here, then the aforementioned assertions about the need for and benefits of surveys have been produced by our research procedure. Secondly, the participants do have an ambiguous attitude towards surveys and this could have been a reason why they agreed to take part in depth interviews. If this is the case, they probably represent a special category of hard refusers and our qualitative findings apply just to this group. Thirdly, this discrepancy may be caused by an essential incongruity between what one *considers* important and how one actually *acts*. Statements about the meaningfulness of surveys refer to rational reasoning: one cannot easily deny that surveys may, indeed, bring some benefits, mostly to various 'others' (government, society, even respondents themselves). However, surveys are completely unimportant in the light of the participants' *own* priorities and *their own* system of values: those people are not interested in survey results and surveys might as well not exist. With this interpretation (which we will later demonstrate as most likely), this group of refusers has a similar attitude to surveys as persons classified into the first category: both groups just ignore surveys.

The third category which can be identified in terms of their ideas of and opinions on surveys shows a strongly negative attitude, resulting from their overall



disapproving attitudes towards the economic and political transformation in Poland after 1989. Surveys remind them of public opinion polls, which are of no interest for this group. Those persons think surveys make no sense because they confirm the obvious: *'Well, it's quite clear what the situation in the country' is like.*' From this perspective, neither the public nor survey respondents can derive any benefits from surveys. Instead, surveys are used by politicians to raise interest in their activities: *'I consider them useless but maybe they help someone. Well, the people who're at power. They know which topic to tackle to boost interest.'* Moreover, politicians are thought to manipulate survey findings: *'they will arrange it in any way they please. /.../ People have been put off all those ...surveys, all that because someone will change it to their benefit anyway, show what they want to show. People run away from it because they're fed up with those crazy politicians /.../ And they /politicians/ will bend it anyway.'*

This particular QS participant does not exclude his own participation in surveys but only if he feels really outraged about something. A survey would provide an opportunity to express an opinion about politicians *'Perhaps I would take part /in an interview/. If something really hacked me off... Sometimes they talk about some stupid things and it makes your blood boil. /.../ A benefit ...well... One would let off some steam.'*

A sense of insecurity in any sense does not apply to this category: *'What can a survey change? They can't take my pension away any more'* (23: M, 61 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

### *Reasons for refusals*

The relationship between participants' ideas of and opinions on surveys and refusals is not always simple or straightforward. This relationship is relatively clear in the first and the last of the aforementioned participant categories.

As described earlier, the first category comprises individuals who just ignore surveys as something that does not translate directly onto decisions that affect their lives. As we will show later, those individuals are socially isolated, albeit in a special sense.

After receiving an advance letter, those persons did not wonder whether they should agree to participate. Such thoughts did not appear until interviewer's visit, if at all. *'I understood the goal of that work in general but I didn't see any deeper sense in it. Can people's positive or negative feelings have any effect on the operation of the town council?'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). European

topics which those participants expected in the survey was too distant: it went beyond things which were directly relevant to them. When asked about the main reason of refusal, one participant stated: *'No interest /.../ I thought, a European survey, from Warsaw, for me, completing a questionnaire'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife). Another person answered in the same spirit: *'I'm a European and that concerns me. I do realise it but I'm not too interested in these things'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

However, this does not indicate a reluctant or hostile attitude towards the ESS or surveys in general. Rather, it demonstrates complete indifference. As a result, eventual participation, if any, will be purely accidental. This is illustrated by the following verbatims: *'I think that there are no obstacles to my participation, and I don't mind, either'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife); *'One doesn't always feels like doing these things and doesn't always have the time'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). As a result, when an interviewer calls, even a minor thing may decide about consent or refusal, for instance mess in the house: *'an interviewer came to my house but I had to refuse because I was in the middle of redecorating my house and it felt awkward to ask her in. I said 'I refuse' but then I regretted it. I could've arranged another appointment with her. At that very moment I didn't think about it, I had to make a decision and I didn't explain why'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife).

Participants' actual behaviour during the interviewer's visit contradicts their claims about willingness to be interviewed. Firstly, the refusal was firm, i.e. they did not agree to be interviewed at a different time: *'I said no and I said that it / another date/ is out of the question'* (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife). Secondly, the quoted participant did not mention her flat redecoration, as this would have opened a possibility to be interviewed at a later date. She said she was *'in a hurry to catch a bus'* in order to close the contact as soon as possible.

Positive impressions made by the interviewer (*'nice lady', 'I liked her'*) did not have any effect on the decision about participation in a survey.

The second category identified earlier comprises persons who acknowledge the sense and meaningfulness of surveys yet have various reservations about them. Due to those reservations, this is a heterogeneous category.

Refusals which are easiest to interpret are the ones where the sampled person has a strong sense of threat to their personal safety and home safety. As a reminder: in our QS this was an elderly, socially marginalised person who never opens doors to any strangers, not to mention letting anyone in. Any attempt by an unfam-

miliar person or institution, whether by phone or letter, is interpreted as attempted fraud, scam or a way to obtain money under false pretences. Obviously, the door cannot be opened to an interviewer, either. Here is how a interviewer's visit is described: *'After that first thing that I got /i.e. advance letter/, a lady came, I think.'* The participant and his wife were not at home. *'Our grandson was there /student who lives in their household/. And the lady came to visit him. And he let her in but not to the flat. He kept her in the corridor. And we yelled at him, asking why he let her in. If you don't know that someone, remember: you're not supposed to let anyone in.'* This situation must have strongly annoyed the respondent since he came back to that visit two more times later during the interview. The interviewer telephoned him after a few days. This activated suspicions of fraud and scams etc. and, in connection with the previous visit, lead the respondent's wife to give a very emotional, strong refusal: *'She called about a survey. And I said: what are you talking to me about? What survey? What do you want? I don't know anything about any survey and please don't call me. Well, you see, if someone called you on the phone about a survey...'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

However, it is important to add that the same respondent, in consultation with his wife, easily agreed for an IDI in his flat and did not even ask the moderator for an Id.

Other participants of our QS i.e. the ones who verbally demonstrated their acceptance for surveys, struggled to reconcile those stated views with their refusal. They could not identify any rational arguments which led to a refusal. When asked about it, one QS participant stated openly: *'I tried to answer this question to myself. I was sitting and thinking but I couldn't find any reasonable arguments'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic). Further on, when asked about the decisive reason for their refusal, participants from this category gave an identical answer ('I didn't feel like it'). *'I just didn't feel like it'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired); *'I didn't have any single, specific argument for it, and I was feeling lazy'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic).

Another thing they have in common is that they feel psychological resistance against letting an interviewer into their house, which they view as a private place. This probably played a role for their decision. However, these are all similarities.

One of those persons (a retired school teacher) is a high social person, with a sense of mission, as we will show later in more detail. Her day is filled with a variety of chores and duties: she works in her job, additionally she works as a probation officer for the court and helps children from underprivileged fami-

lies with homework. During the fieldwork period she additionally had family problems *'And that probably pulled me off, somehow. Not somehow, it did for sure. /.../ I could not go deeper into it and take that thing /ESS/ seriously enough.'* This shows that regardless of her statement on the importance of surveys, they are placed far behind in her private hierarchy, behind job responsibilities and immediate assistance to children in her care. This interpretation is likely since this participant shows considerably distance towards surveys, as we demonstrated when discussing advance letters (*'People are playing some games, don't know why...'*). Moreover, she has doubts about reliability of survey findings (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. educ., retired).

Another person who cannot understand his own reasons of refusal (a young academic), is an opposite case versus the aforementioned case. As we will discuss in detail below, this person is self-oriented, focusing on her job and pleasures. However, this is not a case of typical social isolation but, rather, ego-centrism. In the follow-up survey this participant wrote that she had refused to participate in the survey *'out of purely selfish, egoistic reasons.'* An interviewer's visit, much as the advance letter earlier (causing a negative reaction), were an attempt to intrude into that participant's private world which has not space for matters that do not concern her directly. Therefore, that person did not even consider whether or not to participate in the ESS because it was obvious that she would not take part in it. When asked when exactly she made her decision, she answers: *'There simply wasn't any pondering /.../ it made no sense to wonder about it, that's it.'* Again, this person earlier declared a generally positive attitude towards surveys and an understanding of this social practice.

During the interviewer's visit this person refused flatly, without stating any reasons. *'I remember I was tough and firm about it. /.../ I said I knew I had the right not to participate. I was probably a bit rude.'* The refusal had nothing to do with the interviewer who asked for participation, with her behaviour or types of arguments used: *'/The interviewer/ she was doing it very gently, without imposing anything, she was behaving in the right way, I'd say. She was polite /.../ her behaviour was appropriate and accurate in the sense of this job and in a purely human sense /.../ overall, that lady presented all the information, I liked what she said.'* However, this refuser did not listen to arguments and they played no role for her decision: *'I didn't let her finish, I interrupted after each sentence and I categorically said I won't participate in the survey, that I have the right to refuse and that I don't have to take part. I replied 'no' to each of her sentences.'* What is characteristic and what confirms our interpretation (self-orientation) is that the refusal gave that person a sense of satisfaction: despite the interviewer's politeness

and the gift she felt she did not 'soften up' and finally 'got her way' (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic).

As for the third category of QS participants which we identified with regard to their opinions on and ideas of surveys, refusals stem from their negative attitude towards the political and economic transformations occurring in Poland after 1989. Those persons cannot find a place for themselves in the new world. Surveys are viewed as an area of current government's activity and the interviewer is seen as a representative of the government. The ESS survey, perceived as a European study, by no means mitigates that reluctance: *'In the past there was Russia, now there's the EU. And the same things are happening. You're not allowed to do this and that'* (23: M, 61 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

When discussing reasons for refusals, it is worthwhile mentioning one more finding from our study which supports our doubts as to the truthfulness of reasons for refusal given to interviewers (Stoop 2005, Brem 1993). Some QS participants openly admitted that the reasons they mentioned to interviewers had little to do with actual reasons, at least the ones they see as reasons. Presumably, there are many motivations behind such false declarations and we found two types in our study. Firstly, it was a sense of embarrassment, as in the aforementioned case where someone did not want to admit she had a mess at home because of the ongoing redecoration (the stated reason was *'I'm in a hurry to catch a bus'*). Secondly, the norm of politeness towards the interviewer may play a role. It is not appropriate to state openly *'that I don't feel like talking to you at all, I'm not interested. I'd just say I'm sorry I have no time'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). Therefore, if we refer to the aforementioned classification, the real reason of refusal is survey-related whereas the stated one is person-related. No time seems to be a versatile excuse since it was also mentioned by another refuser who was pursuing his hobby (repairing old motorcycles) during the interviewer's visit (9: M, 16 y.o., student). This confirms the findings obtained by Couper (1997). In fact, reasons stated in the follow-up surveys, at least the ones administered through a mail questionnaire, seem closer to the subjectively perceived actual reasons.

### *Summary and conclusions on reasons for refusals*

Our analysis identified the following reasons for refusals:

1. A refusal motivated by lack of interest in and indifference towards surveys. It results from sampled person's self-orientedness. Surveys make sense to them as long as they help to obtain information that is directly useful for the person concerned. A social survey, notably a 'European' or 'academic', does not fall into that category. Therefore, the stated reason for refusal is chosen at random, just to get rid of the interviewer, refusing to make an appointment at another date. Presumably, such persons will not take part in public opinion polls as such polls concern the country's affairs or European affairs which are too distant and uninteresting for them. Meanwhile, such persons are willing to take part in surveys which are conducted for practical purposes of direct relevance, including market surveys.

It seems that these cases represent low potential for refusal conversion in ESS or other surveys. The interviewer as a person plays hardly any role, and arguments for participation in an academic or a political survey will not be seen as convincing. Only pure accident may prompt those persons to agree to be interviewed.

2. Participation in surveys is an intrusion into privacy, into one's asylum and psychological intimacy which, however, is unrelated to the topics covered in survey questions (potentially sensitive). Moreover, participation also entails a disruption of certain fixed patterns and habits (*'on that day I usually do this...'*). People who are more conservative and less open to change will not allow their fixed patterns to be disrupted. Those could be elderly persons, even actively involved in social life, as well as young egocentrics. While this group does recognise the benefits of participation in surveys (a new experience, an opportunity to learn new things and make some realisations that might make a difference in their lives) yet this is exactly why they refuse to take part in the interview. They live enclosed in their private world, focused on themselves or even on their social mission, and do not want any changes in that personal world.

The potential for refusal conversion in these cases is low. As those persons are aware of the meaningfulness of surveys and potential benefits of participation, such arguments will not work in their case. Perhaps an interview outside their home (e.g. in a café or at workplace) would open an opportunity as it would be less of an intrusion into privacy.

3. Refusals caused by temporary family or work problems that take up one's all attention, despite those person's stated positive attitude towards surveys. This is one of the reasons behind unwillingness to participate in surveys identified by Smith (1984). Among all the discussed refusals, this one seems easiest to convert by offering another, more convenient date and time of the interview. Some reference to the social role of surveys may prove indispensable, though.
4. Refusals driven by fears of one's own safety, and fears of falling victim to fraud or deception, related to fraudulent marketing practices or deceiving someone to pay money under false pretences. Distrust towards surveys and strangers (interviewers in this case) is just one element of more general sense of frustration and deprivation, distrust towards the external world as a whole which, in subjective perception, has hurt those persons in some way. These are not cases of people who are afraid of being deceived but, rather, cases of elderly, ill, poorly educated citizens who cannot find a job and who feel excluded. Due to their 'learned helplessness', such socially isolated persons may be more susceptible to the influence of external authorities, e.g. household members or neighbours, who make the most important decisions for them. In the case of such refusals, where fear and concerns play a major role, any minor detail may lead to either a consent or a refusal: elements of the advance letter, interviewer's appearance, some element of the introductory conversation, the first person in the household who meets the interviewer etc. What played a decisive role in our QS study was the mail questionnaire and a professional handling of the telephone communication which made that person aware of the actual purpose of the study. However, conversion of such refusals in a standard survey seems difficult. Each renewed contact attempt will only aggravate the sense of threat (cf. aforementioned reactions to interviewer's phone call).
5. Refusals driven by negative attitudes towards surveys as such, viewed as a useless social practice (*'everyone knows what the situation in the country looks like'*) which produces findings that are ultimately manipulated or abused. In fact, the concerns do not refer to surveys only but, more broadly, to a hostile external 'establishment' which thinks up surveys and fabricates results to stay in power for as long as possible. The belief that survey results undergo manipulations and results are sometimes fabricated is part of refusers' broader idea of politicians. By refusing to take part in surveys such persons manifest resistance against the authorities and the social and political situation (and this may be the only way of resistance available to them). Much as in the previous

case (see point 4), these types of attitudes and reasons for refusals are typical of individuals who feel marginalised.

6. Refusals driven by a sense of incompetence may run in parallel with a sense of social marginalisation (elderly people). This reason was stated by one QS participant from this category when responding to the follow-up survey. However, this reason is not necessarily connected with marginalisation, which means that it may be the only and sufficient reason. A sense of incompetence (signalled by interviewers in connection with ESS fieldwork, a survey 'on European affairs') may be found e.g. among elderly inhabitants of rural areas who are not much afraid of their physical safety, have pro-social attitudes and take part in the life of their communities. Yet they believe that the topic of the survey goes beyond their own knowledge and articulation abilities. However, such refusals seem relatively easy to convert in a face-to-face encounter with an interviewer. It is not difficult to convince such persons that their opinions are as important as other people's views and turn them into valuable respondents providing well-thought-out opinions.
7. Refusals caused by real lack of time at a particular moment did not occur in our QS. However, we mention them here because the argument of 'having no time' is frequently mentioned by refusers (as 'the first one they can think of', 'the easier one') while there are actually other reasons at play. In our studies this argument was mentioned by those who ignored surveys. In that case such refusals actually belong to group 1 and are very hard to convert in practice.
8. Other reasons of refusal found in our studies (i.e. belief that surveys make no difference in practice, they are just 'up in the air', or lack of trust in survey results) do not seem to play a crucial role for decisions to participate. Rather, they provide additional arguments for people who actually refuse for other reasons. However, such beliefs certainly do not motivate sampled persons to take part in surveys. The first argument was particularly noticeable among those who ignore surveys (Group 1). The second argument, concerning lack of trust towards surveys and manipulative use of results was present virtually in all identified groups except Group 1 (the one who does not care about surveys at all).

The problem is that such arguments cannot be successfully challenged by interviewers during the initial contact since surveys do not, in fact, replace referendums, errors in pre-election surveys *do* happen, many opinions expressed during surveys actually *are* transient and diverging results of opinion polls held by different agencies may, indeed, raise suspicions about manipulation.



One more finding from our study deserves attention in the context of refusals. Regardless of when the refusal decision was made, i.e. before or during the interviewer's visit, the QS participants did not make any cost-benefit analysis related to their participation in the survey. This would be understandable in the case of people who ignore surveys (classified into Group 1), and those who felt strongly threatened (Group 4). However, similar reactions were reported even by persons who acknowledged the meaningfulness and benefits of surveys: during the encounter with an interviewer, that positive attitude did not actualise, it did not spontaneously counterbalance concerns associated with surveys. This finding additionally confirms that claimed positive attitudes towards surveys, and perhaps also reservations connected with them, seem to be rationalisations and, as such, do not translate into actual behaviours. In fact, such persons ignore surveys, considering them insignificant and not worth pondering.

Some of our QS participants did ponder about participation in the ESS but they did so only after the interviewer left; following their firm refusal to be interviewed at that particular moment or on any later date.

## Social isolation

As Groves and Couper (1998) describe it, social isolation (connectedness, disengagement) means being out of touch with the mainstream culture of society. Isolated persons remain outside the influence of the dominant culture, rejecting its norms or adopting their own norms instead. This may result from a sense of prolonged disadvantaged situation of their own social group, or a long-lasting lack of relations between their respective group and the larger society. Such people are generally socially disengaged and self-oriented. One symptom of social isolation is the dwindling sense of civic duty and reluctance to take part in social events aimed at general public good. For this reason they are less likely to participate in surveys which serve such purposes. 'Lower participation in official surveys, or surveys being seen as coming from vested organisations, could be expected from those who score low on civic duty, who are cynical about political institutions, and who lack trust in governmental organizations. /.../ If elderly people, single-person households, ethnic minorities, mobile households, people out of employment and big city dwellers are more likely to refuse, this may be due to the fact that they occupy a more isolated or less integrated position in society' (Stoop 2005: 81). Naturally, this does not mean that anyone who belongs

to these groups will automatically occupy an isolated position and refuse to take part in surveys. Rather, a sense of marginalisation creates a conducive environment for social isolation.

Many studies directly or indirectly confirm the claim about a connection between social isolation and refusals or, at least, non-participation in surveys. Those studies also demonstrate a positive relationship between political involvement and survey participation (see Loosveldt et al. 1998, Traugott and Katosh 1979, Granberg and Holmberg 1992, Vooght 2004), between survey participation and indicators of social isolation (lack of trust in people, negative view on the performance of democracy, negative mood assessment) (Sztabiński, Sztabiński and Przybysz 2007) or between belonging to marginalised groups and survey participation (Groves and Couper 1998).

However, Loosveldt and Carton (2002) demonstrate that social isolation may also be connected with the individual socio-psychological make-up. Analysis of refusals in the second wave of the panel survey showed that refusals were more common among persons who, in the first wave, scored high on utilitarian individualism, i.e. were more interested in personal gain and less in societal well-being.

In our QS study we had participants who can be classified as typical cases of social isolation which provide a good illustration of the aforementioned profile of the category. They are elderly and retired so, in a sense, marginalised. Their encounters with people are confined to the nearest neighbours: other pensioners, close relatives, perhaps a narrow circle of retired friends. During those encounters conversations boil down to complaining about the current situation in the country, politicians who fail to meet pre-election promises to pensioners, cases of fraud and theft etc. Days are spent doing minor household chores, going for a walk, sometimes going to the cinema and pursuing hobbies (e.g. repairing old tractors, fishing, gardening etc.). *'And that's how we pass our days'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). Those people would like to earn some extra income to supplement their retirement pensions but they cannot find work because of their age and low qualifications.

This group is very critical about officials from central and local government whom they perceive as fighting for positions and pursuing their own interests instead of solving problems of importance for the society and the country such as unemployment, poverty, unavailability of cheap housing. It is important to add that critical attitudes towards politicians / government officials is widespread so it cannot serve as a distinguishing feature of socially isolated persons. Nevertheless, this category of people feels marginalised: authorities are not inter-

ested in 'average' citizens; such as themselves (a reference to reduced role of the state as a welfare provider). *'In the past /under communism/ there was an opportunity, you could get ahead more easily. And now when you have no money, you might even end up living under a bridge. And who cares.'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired).

As 'ordinary citizens' they feel they have no influence over things that happen in the country and in their city/town: *'An average person hasn't got any /influence/. Those who can are the ones in parties, ones that attend meetings and so on.'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired). On the other hand, those persons are unwilling to get involved in local affairs or country-scale affairs or even to participate in public meetings. This reflects their general reluctance about getting socially involved (*'I don't do social work, I don't run around places. I don't like that kind of meetings'* 23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired) and/or lack of belief that such activities may be effective: *'If an average man said something at one of those meetings, that would hardly make any difference'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'Whoever is going to listen to them /ordinary people/ in the first place?'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired).

The sense of having no influence leads to withdrawal from social life and focusing on one's own affairs: *'I don't want to /participate in life around me/. Let the young generation stand up for their rights. /.../ I'd like to have what I need, to be able to choose what I want. I'd like more money, a higher pension, to have a bit of a good life'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired).

Those respondents see no sense in participation in surveys as they associate it with social involvement which they do not want. This might also be related to their sense of being marginalised: *'I personally.. at my age... they /surveys/ are not for me, really'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

The cases of social isolation described above are a product of those persons' objective situation. They are elderly people who, because of their age, health or problems with adapting to the changing political and economic reality, feel alienated from the society and so they focus on themselves and their personal problems.

However, as our research has shown, alienation, self-orientation and lack of interest in participation in larger society may also be a consequence of a choice, albeit perhaps not an entirely conscious one. Those persons are seemingly immersed in the society yet their world is limited to their own lives and/or the lives of their closest relatives/friends. From this perspective, these persons do not belong to the mainstream society.

The cases in this group may include young people who cannot find a place for themselves in the society. We had a case of a young (22 y.o.) single man born in a small town, now working in a city and living in rented housing. He holds the same belief as retirees, i.e. that authorities are not interested in people like himself and that he cannot influence the events in the country. This is combined with lack of belief that he may ever attain such influence: *'By and large, about politics, whatever I think and however I vote, I won't make much difference. I don't have much influence on what's going on in this country /.../ The government follows its own decisions and it doesn't pay much attention to what people need or what people appeal for. /.../ Theoretically, people have the opportunity / to express their opinions publicly/ but what will it bring and what impact will it have?'*

This participant views his duties towards the country exclusively at the religious and patriotic angle: being a Roman Catholic, teaching his future children patriotic poems and patriotism, reading a book by a Polish author from time to time, and listening to Polish music.

A sense of having no influence on developments in the country is coupled with a feeling that he has no opportunity to become independent and, more generally, has no chances in life: *'with my income I stand no chance of buying a flat. If I wanted to buy a car, I'd have to take a loan and repay it forever. I recently wanted to start a school but it would cost me quite a lot considering my monthly income.'* The outcome is similar here as in the case of marginalised retirees: self-orientation. *'To be honest with you, I'm not in the least interested in politics /.../ Well, ...of course I'm interested in things that affect me directly.'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). This participant intends to emigrate from Poland, which is presumably his attempt to escape the society where he has not been able to find a place for himself.

Below is a profile of another participant of our QS, also classified as socially isolated by her own choice: *'I don't go to work, I'm raising 3 kids. My husband has his own business, there is no way I could take up a job, he needs to be at work at 6 a.m. and usually comes back around 8 p.m. I take care of the kids.'* Her days are busy with household chores: cleaning, shopping, cooking, helping children with the homework. *'In the evening we'd watch TV. Then when we go to our bedroom, my husband reads 'cause he likes it, and I do crosswords. I have no hobby. /.../ I got into that groove. I wish I had a job, I'd have more friends and time for myself, I'd be more around other people. Now I'm virtually alone. I don't go to see friends or neighbours, I have no time for that. Once in a while we arrange to go out for a beer and I spend the rest of my time alone.'*

Her entire life, thinking and values focus on family matters. When asked what she most enjoys, she says: *'Going away with the family, it doesn't matter where we go, this is when I can relax, this is a pleasure and everything makes me happy.'* In her ideas of ideal life (simplified version of the Rokeach Value Survey) she chooses 'Devoting oneself to one's own family' and 'Love' but she adds: *'I think love is contained in the family when you take care of your family.'*

She is willing to get involved in social activities only if they directly concern her family: *'The school asked the parents to paint the fence. That was no problem. When there's some help needed at school, like baking a cake for a festival, I'm always willing to do so. My kids attend that school so why not help out?'* She also got involved in the construction of a street crossing in her neighbourhood because children's safety was at stake. She does not get involved in other things because *'nobody will listen to them /people like herself/.'* She mentions taxes as her only obligation towards the state: *'I pay taxes, like everyone else, I don't owe anything.'*

This participant is not interested in politics. She did participate in parliamentary elections but only because a friend was a candidate and he asked for her vote (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic voc. educ., housewife). As a reminder: this person completely ignored the advance letter and the entire ESS survey.

Yet another QS participant may be classified as socially isolated by choice, as she focuses on herself, her own pleasures and affairs. This is an extremely ego-centric person, viewing herself as the only point of reference, seeing the world around her from her own angle. An attempt to encourage her to participate in something that does not concern her directly (in this case a social event such as a survey) is viewed as intrusion into her life, an attempt to impose something that does not fit into her universe where she is the axis and the point of reference. Thus, this is not as much about not letting a stranger in her house or about being asked personal questions but, rather, about a more general issue: someone is trying to influence an element of her life, and this causes her strong opposition. This explanation accounts for the aforementioned aggressive reaction to the interviewer. *'In actual fact, my life depends on whatever my husband or my dog needs, or what I need, and it's more about pleasures. We have no kids so live is not stressful, it's pleasant. When I teach classes, my day is structured according to my working hours at the university. On Thursday nights we go out for a swim, on Fridays we have the horses, same on Sundays. As a rule, I start my day by walking my dog, then comes a meal and I get ready for work, I work, I come back and relax, then I eat, walk the dog and go to bed. /On weekends/ when we don't feel like doing anything at home, we take the dog and go to visit my parents. In*

*the evening we go out with friends or go to visit my husband's parents. We need to meet up with someone in any case /.../ Our lives are not stable or stabilised. It's not going to sound very nice but it depends on what we feel like doing, we're just in that kind of situation.'*

She sees her obligations towards the state from her personal perspective: the state is good as long as it operates in a way that is beneficial for her: *'Of course I feel a sense of obligation /towards the state/ but this sense of duty stems from purely egoistic considerations. I just take care of my own benefit: if my country works well, I will live well. That is, 'working well' means 'well' from my own perspective, and according to the values I profess.'* She sees voting in elections in similar light.

In a way, this participant lives outside the institutional world: *'Overall, they / public institutions/ don't support me, but they don't get in my way, either.'* She is willing to have a look at survey results as long as it does not require much effort on her part: *'If they are presented to me, nice and ready, I will /look at them/* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic). As a reminder, when answering the mail questionnaire, this respondent wrote that her refusal was caused by *'purely selfish and egoistic reasons.'*

The last two cases confirm the findings by Loosveldt and Carton (2002) which indicate that social isolation may have an individual socio-psychological grounding and does not necessarily entail a sense of alienation, nor does it have to originate from belonging to a socially excluded or marginalised group.

### *Summary and conclusions on social isolation*

Our research seems to confirm that social isolation may play a crucial role for understanding of many refusals. It seems that social isolation may be the underlying cause of cases where surveys are ignored, and sampled persons feel threatened or have a sense of intrusion in their broadly understood privacy etc.

However, social isolation and the pertaining self-orientedness coupled with absence of a sense of civic duty, and general reluctance to participate in the society's affairs may originate from objective circumstances of a person's life or from a more or less conscious choice. In the latter case social isolation is not necessarily connected with social marginalisation, social exclusion or a sense of alienation.

Social isolation in the 'traditional' sense i.e. as a derivative of social marginalisation, occurred in our research in the case of elderly persons/retirees. Apart

from the aforementioned characteristics of this group (limited social contacts, sense of being wronged and uninteresting for public authorities, withdrawal from social life etc.), two other aspects must be stressed. Firstly, people in this group have a negative attitude towards surveys. They might believe that survey results are manipulated, fabricated and used for people in power or in 'the system'. They might also acknowledge the benefits and meaningfulness of surveys but still think that this social practice is useless for people like themselves. Secondly, and more importantly, routinely performed activities play the main role in those people's lives. They have the same daily schedule, always shop in the same destinations, view the reality in a routine way (for instance, negating all current developments in Poland), and react routinely (e.g. to a stranger's visit in their home) etc. Any changes to those routines are not just uncomfortable and irritating (as is the case with social isolation 'by choice') but it borders on psychological threat to personal safety. Such persons live according to fixed patterns and, consequently, do not need to make any decisions or new choices in their daily lives. New situations such as a request to take part in a survey, are fitted into familiar patterns or rejected as a threat. When an advance letter arrives or an interviewer comes to their door, those people react routinely, without trying to go deeper into the situation. Their previous experience tells them that a letter from an unfamiliar institution is a fraud attempt. A stranger visiting them at home brings a risk of theft or, of perceived as a representative of a public institution, involves an encounter with 'the establishment' (which they reject).

This routine-based thinking seems to be part of a broader phenomenon: general reluctance and rejection of anything which goes beyond the familiar world in which they know how to live. The same persons were very critical about the spread of computers, Poland's EU membership and the new things introduced after 1989: democracy and economic reforms. In contrast, they were nostalgic about the communist era. If this, indeed, is the case, then the profile described here applies, above all, to elderly citizens and less so to other socially marginalised groups.

The second type of social isolation, the consciously chosen one, consists in focusing on oneself and one's immediate environment (as a result of a more or less conscious choice). Those people are concerned only about things that directly or indirectly affect them and are connected with matters of importance, ones that are central for those individuals. Such matters may include family, successful career, own pleasures.

What matters, however, is whether such isolation is a consequence of a conscious choice. Our interview with the woman who focused exclusively on her

family shows that she is somewhat resentful that her life is that of vegetation between children, husband and household chores. She states openly that she does not want that kind of life for her daughter. Therefore, one may assume that such person, in an attempt to reduce psychological dissonance, must find some 'ideology' to justify their situation or, in order to retain a positive self-image, devise (perhaps only mentally) ways of leaving that situation. In this particular case the participant believed that 'putting family first' is a way to show love and self-sacrifice. The young man mentioned earlier believed that emigration will solve all his problems which, after all, were not his fault but that of 'bad' government and 'bad' society.

However, this type of social isolation could not account for the situation of the young student who is passionate about old motorcycles and not much interested in anything else, including his education. Naturally, he is not interested in surveys, either. A similar case is that of the young woman who leads an active life and is oriented towards own satisfaction and indulgence. It is in these cases that we see consciously chosen isolation; a situation where both of them 'feel good'.

Thus, a distinction must be made between two subtypes of isolation by choice. The first one is a life where people barricade themselves from the outside world and focus on themselves (their families) but it has happened 'in the course of life' and those people either have lost any influence on their situation or they make vague plans of escaping it. There seems to be a chance of getting through that barrier by appealing to their inner, subconscious sense of frustration. An interview, as an encounter with another person, may temporarily mitigate the sense of void caused by isolation.

The second subtype of social isolation by choice results from a fully conscious choice. In that case the barrier between those people and the rest of the society is permanent, without any gaps. Therefore, the chances for a successful conversion are almost nil. Interviewer, much as any other 'intruder', is a 'foreign body' in their well-arranged, self-oriented life and requires them to take a break and make an effort (perhaps intellectual). However, any effort for the benefit of others is out of the question for this group, unless it brings personal satisfaction. Moreover, the interview frame imposes certain constraints such as a change of normal rhythm and the need to make some adjustments. Meanwhile, people from this group seem to attach the highest importance to individualism and life in harmony with their inner vocation, personal happiness and inner harmony (cf. Rokeach Value Survey). If their life is that of constant change, all of those changes must be accepted. A request to take part in an interview on a specific day at a specific time does not fit into these values and this world.



### *Final conclusions and discussion*

Groves et al. (2006:721) argue that the decision to participate in a survey is complex and based on a variety of factors: 'We see the decision to respond to a survey as influenced by a set of predispositions of the sampled person that, in turn, are based on personal experiences, social statuses, group norms, personality traits, and personal interests. Some of these predispositions might be quite central to the sampled person /.../ Others may be less central.' Our qualitative study aimed at understanding refusals fully support this assertion. By running a case-by-case analysis we were able to establish that each refusal case was different in essence and dependent on a different set of factors or at least the importance attached to those factors varied. This is the first general conclusion from our qualitative project.

The second general conclusion refers to the need to distinguish between conscious refusal and one that is caused by ignoring surveys (the interview). While the ultimate outcome is identical, i.e. the interview is not conducted due to lack of co-operation, each refusal happens at a different level of consciousness and has different consequences for potential conversion.

Someone who makes a conscious refusal accepts the existence of surveys as part of the surrounding reality but for various reasons, rational or emotional, objective or subjective, will not consider it or embrace it as part of his/her experience. Importantly, in those cases refusers are nearly always able to explain why they refused to be interviewed. This has important consequences because one might look for rational arguments to convert that refuser and use those arguments during the interview. For instance, the introduction design might be modified, with a focus on elements that are challenged by that refuser: the importance of that particular survey, credibility of results, the use of findings etc. Another option is to postpone the interview until family or work problems have been solved, to instruct interviewers not to talk to minors in the sampled person's household, to find ways to increase interviewer's credibility or to show the interview as an element which fits into the universe of socially isolated persons (retirees).

In contrast, refusers who ignore surveys pose very different challenges. From their perspective, surveys are a non-existent element of reality. Accordingly, any advance letters, interviewers coming to talk, as well as survey results published in the media do not concern things that are of importance, that represent priorities or, at least, are involving in some way. Even if they realise the importance and purposes of surveys, those refusers think about them only in rational terms,

without translating it into their system of values or actual behaviours. Things that are potential priorities include immediate family, a hobby, successful career or one's own pleasures. Social surveys do not intersect in any way with areas or values of interest for those refusers. For this reason, people who ignore surveys are rarely able to provide rational (whether objective or subjective) reasons to explain their refusal. This is because there are no such reasons, not on the conscious level at least.

In other words, the first kind of refusal happens at the conscious level. However, the decision is not arrived at through weighing costs and benefits associated with participation but, rather, by checking how the advance letter or interviewer's visit relate to respondents' daily affairs and real choices in areas of interest. Such refusals are also given by persons who are socially isolated in the traditional sense i.e. ones who feel marginalised. As we wrote earlier, they feel threatened by letting a stranger in and are reluctant about the establishment and its institutions etc.

On the other hand, whenever surveys are ignored, this happens beyond the conscious level and results generally from sampled persons' lifestyles and priorities, set in connection with a variety of factors shaping their individual personalities. In those cases, as demonstrated by our research, social isolation loses its traditional sense and should be viewed as a more or less individual choice of a given person. Such refusers perceive society affairs as fundamentally foreign to them. They focus on themselves and on elements of their own surroundings (the ones they consider important). As shown by participants' statements and choices in the Rokeach Value Survey, such attitudes usually have a lot in common with individualism (as opposed to social conformism and attempts to follow norms), as well as egocentrism i.e. seeking to satisfy one's own needs and fulfilling plans. In our study, this was illustrated by a refusal '*out of purely selfish, egoistic reasons.*' Some refusers may choose a life of peace and harmony with their surroundings, others may choose to devote themselves to their families. In any of those cases such orientation is nearly absolute, which means that no social survey or interviewer ('a foreign body') stands a chance of becoming part of this world.

This last comment indicates that, unlike conscious refusals, researchers stand hardly any chance of converting such refusals or holding an interview with refusers belonging to the aforementioned category of people 'ignoring the surveys'. For this to happen, those refusers would need to rearrange their priorities and include participation in surveys among their priorities. That means, in our examples, that the researcher would have to demonstrate that a consent to participate in the survey would bring immediate benefits for the woman's chil-

dren or for another refuser's hobby of repairing old motorcycles. While the last example seems absurd, it is a true one. It shows that researchers cannot win their case against refusers who ignore surveys. They have no arguments to encourage such persons not as much to change their attitude towards surveys but, rather, to rearrange their values and priorities. As we mentioned earlier, some of those refusers declare a positive attitude towards surveys (need and purposes), yet this does not translate into real-life behaviours once an interviewer knocks on their door. And it does not matter that interviewer's arguments are appreciated as exhaustive and competent since they refer to a sphere of life which is of no importance for those persons.

The only window of opportunity is to find a way where the surveying situation is a source of pleasure for such sampled persons. The idea is to offer the aforementioned psychological gratification: *'I give my consent because someone really wants it.'* One example here is a young academic who finally agreed to participate after a few weeks' long exchange of e-mails and explained that she was *'surprised by Mr. Sztabinski's handling of the survey'*, i.e. *'his meticulousness and scrupulosity in things he does.'* Her consent was driven by her own psychological benefits: she felt flattered that the co-ordinator of the survey answered all her questions and spent so much time doing it. Yet the survey in itself still remained fairly unimportant.

To what extent will this individualistic and egocentric lifestyle spread in contemporary Polish society? Considering the results of psychographic studies, one may presume that there is a noticeable upward trend in the percentage of individuals (especially those aged up to 35) who put themselves, their immediate surroundings and aspirations (often material ones) first. This might lead us to infer that the share of citizens who will ignore surveys and who, as such, will be virtually impossible to convert, will also systematically increase.

The third general conclusion from our research follows from the second one and refers to the distinction of two types of social isolation: the one we labelled as 'traditional' i.e. caused by social marginalisation, and the one which is chosen and does not follow automatically from people's situation. Despite many similarities between those two types of isolation (self-orientation, reluctance about getting involved in social life etc.), yet their origins and consequences are divergent. While 'traditional' isolation, ensuing from situational circumstances, is 'externally imposed' and 'learned', isolation 'by choice' is anchored in people's priorities and sets of values.

As a result, as we tried to demonstrate, refusals will either be conscious and based on some foundations and, as such, can be potentially converted, or they

follow from automatic reactions such as those when people ignore marketing leaflets handed out in the street. In the latter case conversion of such refusals is virtually impossible because there is no sphere that would be engaging for the respondent and that the interviewer could appeal to while trying to conduct an interview.

The findings from our qualitative research have their limitations. Firstly, while we did collect very extensive material, it was taken from only 7 refusers. Moreover, recruitment for our QS was based, in fact, on self-recruitment, which means that we do not know motivations that prompted refusers to participate. Based on our interviews we can formulate some fairly probable hypotheses concerning those motivations, yet the self-recruitment narrowed our analysis to a particular type of refusers. As a result, we cannot consider that the discussed reactions to advance letters, reasons for refusal or cases of social isolation as exhaustive. Rather, they provide some exemplification of possible reactions and cases which occur in surveys, or perhaps they just show reactions of a particular type of refusers. It is also important to bear in mind that 50 refusers declined the mail questionnaire in the follow-up survey, which means they did not even have the opportunity to consider participating in the qualitative study. As a result, we have hardly any insights into that group.

Secondly, our QS was conducted in Poland, a country with relatively weak and recent democratic tradition and a short history of market economy. Consequently, distrust towards politicians and democratic institutions is widespread, social involvement is weak, and traditional family-oriented bonds prevail. Moreover, citizens tend to have high expectations towards the state in connection with its role as a welfare provider. Therefore, there is no way of determining to what extent such reactions occur also in other countries and whether or not our conclusions are also valid elsewhere.

Thirdly, our QS was conducted in connection with the European Social Survey. Europe-related topics (this is how the ESS was perceived) evoke positive connotations in Poland but are viewed as fairly distant and of little interest. Hence, these conclusions refer to surveys conducted by an academic institution on topics which are of little personal relevance for the respondents.

## References

- Abraham, Katharine G., Aaron Maitland, and Suzanne M. Bianci. 2006. "Nonresponse in the American Time Use Survey". *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 70 (Special Issue): 676-703.
- Brehm, John. 1993. *The Phantom Respondents: Opinion Surveys and Political Representation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Brunner, G. Allen, and Stephen J. Carroll. 1969. "The Effects of Prior Notification on the Refusal Rate in Fixed Address Surveys." *Journal of Marketing Research* Vol. 9: 42-44.
- Couper, Mick P. 1997. "Survey Introductions and Data Quality." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 61: 317-338.
- Couper, Mick P., Nancy A. Mathiowetz, and Eleanor Singer. 1995. "Related Households, Mail Handling, and Returns in the 1990 Census." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* Vol. 7/2: 172-177.
- Dillman, Don A. 1978. *Mail and Telephone Surveys*. New York: John Wiley & Sons
- Dillman, Don. A. 2000. *Mail and Internet Surveys. The Tailored Design Method*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dillman, Don A., Jean Gorton Gallegos, and James H. Frey. 1976. "Reducing Refusal Rates for Telephone Interviews." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 40: 66-78.
- Edwards, Allen. L. 1957 *The Social Desirability Variable in Personality Assessment and Research*. New York: The Dryden Press.
- Granberg, Donald and Soren Holmberg. 1992. "The Hawthorne Effect in Election Studies: The Impact of Survey Participation on Voting." *British Journal of Political Science* Vol. 22: 240-247.
- Groves, Robert M. and Mick P. Couper. 1998. *Nonresponse in Household Interview Surveys*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Groves, Robert M., Mick P. Couper, Stanley Presser, Eleanor Singer, Roger Tourangeau, Giorgina Piani Acosta, and Lindsay Nelson. 2006. "Experiments in Producing Nonresponse Bias." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 70 (Special Issue): 720-736.
- Groves, Robert M., Stanley Presser, and Sarah Dipko. 2004. "The Role of Topic Interest in Survey Participating Decisions." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 68: 2-31.
- Hembroff, Larry A., Debra Rusz, Ann Rafferty, Harry McGee, and Nathanael Ehrlich. 2005. "The Cost-Effectiveness of Alternative Advance Mailings in a Telephone Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 69: 232-245.
- Laurie, Heather, Rachel Smith, and Lynne Scott. 1999. "Strategies for Reducing Nonresponse in a Longitudinal Panel Survey." *Journal of Official Statistics* Vol. 15/2: 269-282.
- Link, Michael W. and Ali Mokdad. 2005. "Advance Letters as a Means of Improving Respondent Cooperation in Random Digit Dial Studies." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 69: 572-587.
- Loosveldt, Geert and Ann Carton. 2002. "Utilitarian Individualism and Panel Nonresponse." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* Vol. 14: 428-438.
- Loosveldt, Geert, Ann Carton, and Jan Pickery. 1998. "The Effects of Interviewer and Respondent Characteristics on Refusals in a Panel Survey." *ZUMA Nachrichten Spezial*, August. No. 4: 249-262.

- Mann, Christopher B. 2005. "Do Advance Letters improve Preelection Forecast Accuracy?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 69: 561-571.
- Singer, Eleanor, John Van Hoewyk, and Mary P. Maher. 2000. "Experiments with Incentives in Telephone Surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 64: 171-188.
- Smith, Tom W. 1983. "The Hidden 25 Percent: An Analysis of Nonresponse on the 1980 General Social Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 47: 386-404.
- Smith, Tom W. 1984. "Estimating Nonresponse Bias with Temporary Refusals." *Sociological Perspectives* Vol. 27/4: 473-489.
- Stocke, Volker and Bettina Langfeld. 2004. "Effects of Survey Experience on Respondents' Attitude toward Surveys." *Bulletin de Methodologie Sociologique* Vol. 81: 5-32.
- Stoop, Ineke. 2005. *The Hunt for the Last Respondent. Nonresponse in sample surveys*. The Hague: Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands.
- Sztabiński, Paweł B., Franciszek Sztabiński, and Dariusz Przybysz. 2007. "Are Non-Respondents Similar to Respondents? Findings from the ESS-2004 Project in Poland." *ASK* Vol. 16: 25-54.
- Traugott, Michael W., Robert M. Groves, and James M. Lepkowski. 1987. "Using Dual Frame Designs to Reduce Nonresponse in Telephone Surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 51: 522-539.
- Traugott, Michael W. and John P. Katosh. 1979. "Response Validity in Surveys of Voting Behavior." *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 43: 359-377.
- Voogt, Robert. 2004. *'I'm not interested': Nonresponse Bias, Response Bias and Stimulus Effects in Election Research*. Academisch Proefschrift, Universiteit van Amsterdam.